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AUTHOR Barger, Robert Newton
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ABSTRACT

As a study in the presentation of a public policy issue in education, the argumentative rationales of 139 opinion pieces (editorials, op-ed pieces, and letters to the editor) in "The New York Times" on the issue of school busing were analyzed. Material from the years 1971-75 was located through "The New York Times Index" and classified according to four bases of argumentation: politics, legality, fairness, and efficacy (whether busing furthered desegregation). For all format types, the most frequently used argument was based on politics (41 percent), with that based on efficacy second (26 percent), and those on law or fairness last (16.5 percent each). Distribution of arguments shifted with public climate, however; political reasoning predominated during the 1972 elections and legality and fairness during nonelection years. The pro-busing position dominated the argument--reflecting "The Times" editorial position--with 75 percent pro and 25 percent con for all opinions. The letters section was the only format type to have more pieces opposed to busing than in favor (56 percent opposed), reflecting the newspaper's policy of choosing letters contrary to editorial positions. The major appeal of the editorials was to political reasoning but that of the letters was to the efficacy and results of busing. The study shows that the opinion pieces reflected already-formed opinions on the issue and that the presentation was propagandistic, with political views dominating the editorials and few neutral letters appearing. (JW)

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BUSING IN THE NEW YORK TIMES:

A Quantitative Case Study of

Educational Public Policy Argumentation*

by

Robert Newton Barger
Eastern Illinois University
Charleston, Illinois 61920

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Introduction

The formation of public policy on any given educational issue is a process as complex as it is fascinating. Many factors are involved in this process of finalizing a public consensus. An examination will be made here of one of the factors of this formative process, namely, its argumentative dimension. This examination will utilize a quantitative case analysis of a particular educational issue in recent national history--the issue of busing. This analysis will yield conclusions which may be of value in understanding considerations involved in the formation of policy not only on this issue, but on other educational policy issues as well. The writer particularly hopes that this study may serve as a paradigm to suggest how quantitative methods may be used to investigate qualitative aspects of educational policy questions.

Design and Procedures

The issue of busing was chosen as a representative issue for policy investigation because of its perennial controversiality. It was an issue on which public opinion was--and still is--sharply divided. Thus, an extended discussion of the issue, both pro and con, was readily available for analysis.

The time frame selected for the study was 1971 through 1975. This time frame was sufficiently removed from the present date of analysis to provide for an objective perspective on the discussion. The time frame also spanned the five years during which most of the

public events occured which significantly affected the discussion of the issue. Finally, the five-year period of the time frame was of sufficient length for the full spectrum of argumentative rationales to be developed and expressed on both sides of the issue.

The forum chosen for examination was The New York Times. The Times is generally recognized as one of the nation's foremost opinion-leaders. It took a strong editorial position on the pro side of the busing issue and opened its opinion columns to an extended discussion of both the pro and the con views. The material investigated in the Times was limited to opinion pieces. These were editorials, op-ed pieces and letters to the editor. Editorials were taken to include signed editorial columns of regular Times columnists as well as unsigned material. Op-ed pieces were the solicited and unsolicited guest columns on the page opposite the editorial page (hence the name "op-ed") for which compensation was given. Letters to the editor were, of course, both unsolicited and uncompensated.

Definition of the specificity of this material to the issue under analysis was standardized through use of The New York Times Index. The Index is an annual publication which indexes all stories in the Times according to topic. Material for the study was collected by identifying all of the citations of opinion pieces explicitly mentioning busing under the heading "Education and Schools--United States--Equal Educational Opportunities" in the Index for the years 1971 through 1975. Additional material was collected after it was identified by internal reference in the originally collected material. This additional material was not located in the original search of the Index because of the lack of explicit mention of busing in the Index's citation or because of an error of omission on the part of the Index editors.

The collected material was then classified by the writer according to its position pro or con on the issue. In almost every instance, the material yielded to a clear pro or con classification. Only in the case of 2.87% of the material was the discretionary judgment of the writer called upon to determine which side of the issue was being more favorably emphasized. Thus, in the case of the "position pro or con" variable, there was a margin of error of ± 2.87%. In no instance did any of the material appear to be absolutely neutral.

Indices to classify the material according to type of argumentative appeal were developed by the writer after he had become thoroughly familiar with the content of the material. The fashioning of indices for classification purposes is still virgin timber in the forests of educational policy analysis and extended experimentation was necessary before workable indices were discovered. An example of a set of indices of argumentative appeal which was tried, but to which the material did not completely respond, was: Association (including arguments based on history, authority, endorsement and parallel), Diversion (including arguments which changed the subject, begged the question or cited unimportant points), Indictment (including arguments charging illegality, immorality, injustice, ineffectiveness or irresponsibility), Misrepresentation (including arguments relying on overly-selective evidence, untruth or exaggeration), Prediction (including arguments relying on projection of future consequences), and Ridicule (including arguments relying on satire or derision). Difficulties associated with the above indices were that, in some instances, the indices were too narrow, thus necessitating an unwieldy number of indices in order to properly classify all of the material. In other instances, the ignorance or subjectivity of the writer jeopardized proper

classification of the material (e.g., was an argument actually untrue? were the points it was making really unimportant? was the argument really relying on overly-selective evidence?). Finally, some of the indices proposed were generically dissimilar and thus could not, together, be taken as a uniform basis for classification.

A set of four indices was finally formulated for the study at hand. These were judged to be sufficiently broad, reliable and generically coherent to validly classify the material. The indices which were developed divided the material according to the bases of argumentation on the issue, namely, according to arguments based on politics, efficacy, legality and fairness.

Material was indexed under the heading of politics if it argued the busing issue from the standpoint of its relationship to the formal political partisan process of government, e.g., how the issue of busing was being used in campaigning, law-making and administration. Material was indexed under the heading of efficacy if it argued the busing issue from the standpoint of whether it was an effective means to the end of desegregation and quality education, e.g., whether it actually helped achieve the goal of desegregation and whether it had a heightening or diminishing effect on educational standards. Material was indexed under the heading of legality if it argued the busing issue from the standpoint of its relationship to law, e.g., whether it was in accord with constitutional and statutory law. Material was indexed under the heading of fairness it if argued the busing issue from the standpoint of ethics, e.g., whether the standards of natural equity were being served.

In some instances, more than one argument index was discussed in an opinion piece. In these cases, the piece was classified according

to what appeared to be the predominating argument index in the piece. An indeterminable degree of subjectivity was involved in this judgment, but certain material modifying the article (e.g., the emphasis in the article's headline and sub-heads) often provided a check on this subjectivity.

Any given study of this type will be made up of different sets of factors and circumstances than the ones in the present investigation and thus will necessitate the development of different sets of indices for classification than the ones used here. There is an admittedly subjective element in this type of undertaking. This subjectivity pertains not only to the development of the indices, but also to the classification of the material by them. But an element of subjectivity is unavoidable in this project, as in any project which involves an hypothesis--since an hypothesis is, by definition, subjectively based. In the end, the subjective element will be tested by how well the material fits the indices which have been developed and by how well the indices help to explain the material when it is analyzed.

Four variables resulted from the design of the study. They were: year of study, argument indices, format type and position pro or con. The number of modes for each of these variables differed: there were five modes for the year of study (one for each year from 1971 through 1975), four for the argument indices (one for each index of politics, efficacy, law and fairness), three for the format type (one for each of the formats of editorial, op-ed piece and letter to the editor), and two for the position pro or con (one for a position favoring busing and one for a position opposing it). Given the variables and their modes, the material is best presented for analysis by a tabular

organization as follows: argument index and position pro or con, by year (Table 1); format type and position pro and con, by year (Table 2); and a summary presentation of all four variables--format type and year, by argument index and position pro or con (Table 3).

Discussion of Findings

The total number of opinion pieces analyzed was 139 (See Table 1). The kinds of arguments most often used in these pieces were arguments based on politics. The total for arguments under this index was 57 (41%). The next most frequently used arguments were those based on efficacy. Here the index total was 36 (26%). Least frequently used were arguments based on law and fairness. The totals for each of these indices were 23 (16.5% each). However, when the data are examined on an annual basis, a shifting trend is detectable. The original generalizations about the arguments are fairly well reflected in the data for the first three years of the study. But in 1974, arguments based on fairness and law outnumbered those based on politics and efficacy. And in 1975, arguments based on efficacy totaled more than all the other indices combined.

Of the 139 opinion pieces, 104 (75%) were pro on the issue and 35 (25%) were con. The pros predominated in each of the argument indices: 55 pro to 2 con in politics, 21 pro to 15 con in efficacy, 16 pro to 7 con in law and 12 pro to 11 con in fairness. But again, when an examination is made on an annual basis, a shifting trend can be observed. In 1971 and 1972 the pro arguments outnumbered the con arguments in each of the four indices, but in 1975 the con arguments outnumbered the pro arguments in three out of four indices.

These shifting trends in the predominant kind of argument used

and in the position pro or con can be basically explained by the influence of contemporary events. In 1971, President Richard Nixon was developing his anti-busing position. In 1972, the presidential campaign was in full swing with Nixon, Wallace, Jackson and Humphrey commenting on the issue. These two years, therefore, had the highest index of arguments based on politics. In fact, the election year of 1972 had 38 (67%) of the five-year total of 57 arguments under the politics index. Almost half (53%) of all the opinion pieces in the five-year study (73 of 139) appeared in this election year. Nineteen seventy three, on the contrary, was a very quiet year for the issue, with only four opinion pieces appearing during the year. In 1974, court decisions were rendered on some metropolitan busing cases, such as those concerning Detroit and Boston. Gerald Ford, the new President, publicly expressed his disagreement with the Boston decision. Nineteen seventy four was also the year of the climax of Watergate. The legal tone prevalent in this year probably influenced the large number of arguments based on fairness and law. In 1975, James Coleman made his pragmatic reassessment of the busing question. This was a major factor in the occurrence in that year of the second highest number of efficacy arguments of any year of the study. In fact, more than half (55%) of all the opinion pieces published in that year fell under this index. The events of 1974 and 1975 occasioned a good deal of con expression on the issue. The Times had hired William Safire, a former Nixon staffer, as their token resident conservative. In 1974, he wrote the only con editorial that the Times ever published on busing during the period of the study. In 1975, Coleman's questioning of the effectiveness of busing was responsible for the high number of con pieces on efficacy.

This was the only year of the five-year study that the con opinion pieces outnumbered the pro.

There is no legal compulsion in the print media, as there is in the electronic media, to provide equal time for opposing opinions on public policy questions. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the Times' presentation of the issue was somewhat unrepresentative. The over-all totals indicate that 104 of the 139 pieces were pro and 35 were con (See Table 2). There were 74 editorials on the issue, of which 73 were pro and one (Safire's) was con. There were 10 op-eds, seven pro and three con. Letters numbered 55, with 24 pro and 31 con. Of the three format types, the letters were the only format where there were more cons than pros. This might be explained by the fact that one of the Times' criteria for printing letters was dissent from an editorial stand. Still, the con letters comprised only 56% of all letters printed on the issue. Looking at the annual totals, it may be seen that the pros outnumbered the cons in the editorials for each of the five years. In the op-eds, the pros outnumbered the cons in two years, the cons predominated in one year and there was a tie for the other two years. In the letters, the cons predominated during four of the five years and the pros during one. Examining the pro and con comparison for each of the argument indices during each of the five years of the study, the cons predominated in only five of the 20 comparisons (See Table 1).

By examining Table 3, the relation between format types and argument indices can be established. Of the 74 editorials, 48 fell under the index of politics, 14 under efficacy, 10 under law and two under fairness. Of the ten op-eds, four were under politics, one each under

efficacy and law and four under fairness. Of the 55 letters, 5 were under politics, 21 under efficacy, 12 under law and 17 under fairness. It can thus be seen that while the major appeal of the editorials was to political considerations, the major appeal of the letters was to results.

Several points can be offered in conclusion about the effect of the argumentation examined in this study on public policy formation. First, because of the influence of contemporary events on the argumentation, as was noted above, it seems that the opinion pieces presented were basically a reflection of existing opinion, rather than a cause of this opinion. At most, they probably served as a reinforcement of already-formed attitudes on the part of the liberal majority of the Times' readers. Secondly, much of the opinion presentation in the Times on this issue was propagandistic in character. This is indicated by the fact that none of the material examined was neutral, and in less than three percent of the cases was there any question about which side of the question was being more clearly favored in a piece. Seventy-five percent of all the material presented in the Times was on the pro side of the issue. In the case of the Times' own editorial position, its editorials were 99% pro, while the con letters represented only 56% of all the letters published on the issue. Moreover, 65% of the pro editorials were based on arguments concerning politics, whereas the con letters to the editor were based largely on the other three indices of efficacy, law and fairness. These latter kinds of arguments might reasonably be considered to be more objective, on the whole, than those based on politics. It is for these reasons that the material can be judged to be more propagandistic than balanced in its presentation. Finally, the two previous points, when combined,

lead to a third conclusion. The fact that the material is reflective or reinforcing as opposed to causative, and propagandistic as opposed to balanced seems to indicate that "the medium is the message." What this means is that, after examining the results of this study, one knows without even reading it what the position of a Times editorial will likely be, or what kind of arguments a con letter to the editor will likely use. In other words, the format types of discussion on this issue will often forecast the content.

Many more implications could be drawn from the three tables of data than have been presented here. Hopefully, however, enough implications have been presented to indicate how quantitative means can be used to investigate qualitative issues.

Table 1

Argument Index and Position Pro or Con, By Year

	Politics			Efficacy			Law			Fairness			Totals		
	Pro	Con	All	Pro	Con	All	Pro	Con	All	Pro	Con	All	Pro	Con	All
1971	8	0	8	3	2	5	2	0	2	2	1	3	15	3	18
1972	37	1	38	11	3	14	9	3	12	5	4	9	62	11	73
1973	2	0	2	0	1	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	2	2	4
1974	4	1	5	3	2	5	5	1	6	4	4	8	16	8	24
1975	4	0	4	4	7	11	0	2	2	1	2	3	9	11	20
	55	2	57	21	15	36	16	7	23	12	11	23	104	35	139

Table 2

Format Type and Position Pro or Con, By Year

	Editorials			Op-eds			Letters			Totals		
	Pro	Con	All	Pro	Con	All	Pro	Con	All	Pro	Con	All
1971	13	0	13	1	0	1	1	3	4	15	3	18
1972	41	0	41	5	1	6	16	10	26	62	11	73
1973	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	2	2	2	2	4
1974	10	1	11	1	1	2	5	6	11	16	8	24
1975	7	0	7	0	1	1	2	10	12	9	11	20
	73	1	74	7	3	10	24	31	55	104	35	139

Table 3

Format Type and Year, By Argument Index and Position Pro or Con

		Editorials						Op-eds						Letters						
		71	72	73	74	75	All	71	72	73	74	75	All	71	72	73	74	75	All	Totals
Politics	Pro	8	31	2	4	3	48	0	2	0	0	0	2	0	4	0	0	1	5	55
	Con	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
	All	8	31	2	4	3	48	0	3	0	1	0	4	0	4	0	0	1	5	57
Efficacy	Pro	3	6	0	1	4	14	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	2	0	7	21
	Con	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	3	1	2	6	14	15
	All	3	6	0	1	4	14	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	8	1	4	6	21	36
Law	Pro	2	3	0	5	0	10	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	5	0	0	0	5	16
	Con	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	1	2	7	7
	All	2	3	0	5	0	10	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	8	1	1	2	12	23
Fairness	Pro	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	2	0	1	0	4	1	2	0	3	1	7	12
	Con	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	4	0	3	2	10	11
	All	0	1	0	1	0	2	1	2	0	1	0	4	2	6	0	6	3	17	23
		13	41	2	11	7	74	1	6	0	2	1	10	4	26	2	11	12	55	139